

KILLING THE DEAD

by Ian Sales

Inspector Dante Arawn stepped out of his house, pulled the door carefully shut behind him, and looked up at the sky. The dark had spread. He had expected as much, but it still pained him to see it. Each day, the lit areas of the sky shrank. There was nothing to be done about it. Nothing, at least, for many decades yet. As the population aged and died, so the sky grew darker. It was a fact of... *life*.

Not everyone accepted that fact. Constable Amrit Supay waited impatiently beside a police cart in the lane for that very reason.

“What do we know?” asked Arawn. He clambered into the cart and settled into the passenger seat.

“South Green Necropolis, sir,” replied Supay. “Another dead body.”

“A bomb?”

“Yes, sir.”

Supay twisted the throttle, and the cart pulled smoothly away from Arawn’s house. The lane was wide enough for a single vehicle only, but they would not find their way blocked. Police carts had priority; all other traffic would be directed onto alternate routes.

The last house of the residential nexus sped rearwards, and now they were in twilight farmlands. Arawn pressed a button on the dash before him, and a view from the rear of the cart appeared in a small area of the windscreen. He had been lucky so far, and he knew it. His residential nexus still had full power, even though almost half of the houses were empty. He wondered what he would do when the power inevitably went, as it had in the constable’s nexus only last month. Move, of course. But he liked his house, was comfortable there. He had lived in it twenty years now, and was reluctant to leave it.

Constable Supay had the windscreen set to night-vision as it was now too dark to see ahead. The road glowed a baleful green, and the fields to either side shone precious platinum and silver. Looking out of the window beside him, Arawn saw only a suggestion of texture stippling the darkness.

“Do we know who they killed?” he asked.

Supay shook his head. “They’re hunting through the databases now, sir. South Green is an old one – second or third generation.”

Arawn knew it would be someone they could not afford to lose. But they had to know who the corpse was in order to know what they might have lost. That was the real crime. Not for the first time, Arawn wondered how the murderers chose their targets. Some believed it was random, but the inspector was not so certain. They were making a point.

A golden fog ahead caught Arawn’s eye. He pulled up a map onto the windscreen and confirmed it was their destination. As the cart drew closer, the fog resolved into a bubble of diffuse yellow light tented over the necropolis. Two police carts – white shapes from which the darkness seemed to slide like liquid – sat outside the light.

Supay parked beside them. Arawn scrambled out. Upright, he could see over the parked vehicles a regular pattern of blacks and dark greys stretching in all directions, curving up to meet the sky and fooling the eye as to distance and dimension. Residential, commercial, and industrial nexuses floated here and there like islands of light. This world we have built, he thought, is a marvellous thing.

Yet there are those who would destroy it.

He turned to the necropolis, and scanned the crime scene. A squat hill clambered up seven low terraces before him. An area on the third terrace from the top was lit by

powerful lamps, under which a pair of police technicians combed for clues. The bomb's effects were plain to see: a mausoleum reduced to rubble, aged millennia beyond its years in microseconds. If they found anything which they could use to identify the body, Arawn would be very much surprised. The only way they'd know who had been bombed was to find the record of interment, to discover in the databases who had been buried there.

He strode forward, stepped up the terraces, and approached the two police techs. Halting just inside the bubble of light, he watched them a moment as they waved their forensic instruments back and forth across the ground like wands. There was nothing magic in it.

"What have we got?" Arawn asked the nearest, a man called Flins. He had worked with him on other murders.

Flins straightened, grimaced at the inspector, and glanced down at the tool he held. He said: "Not a lot. They did a good job. Completely vaporised the body."

"Not even enough for a DNA sample?"

The tech shook his head. "Look at it." Dropping to a squat, he reached out a gloved hand and scooped up a handful of blackened powder. "This is all that's left of the stone."

Arawn turned about in place, peering at the tombs surrounding the destroyed one. On this level, each grave was a large and low stone sepulchre, as if too heavy a weight for the dead to carry on their backs to higher terraces. "These have barely been touched," he pointed out.

"I said they did a good job," Flins replied sourly.

Another bomb exploded two days later. Another mausoleum destroyed and its occupant vaporised. Supay drove Arawn to the crime scene — a different necropolis, further around the curve of the great cylinder. The inspector stood beside one of the police techs' lamps, and watched as Flins and his assistant studied the ground for clues. There would be none, of course. The sepulchre on this low hill had, like the previous ones, been reduced to dust, to ashes.

"The South Green one?" Arawn prompted Supay.

The constable stepped forward into the light. He peered at the inspector, face expressionless, studiously ignoring the tombs in their serried ranks behind him. "Sir?"

"Did you identify the corpse?"

"A climatologist, sir. First generation."

Arawn nodded absently. He could not feel anger or grief at these murders — the victims had been dead and forgotten for almost two centuries. This case, and the earlier ones like it, were more akin to archaeology than a murder investigation.

"How many others in the databases?" Arawn asked.

"Climatologists, sir?" said Supay. "Just one. Second generation. Not even they considered them that important."

"So that's..." Arawn pulled a notepad from his pocket. The warmth of his hand triggered it into life. He poked and prodded at its screen until he had the information he wanted. "Let's see... a seismologist, a xenobiologist, a hydrologist, and a linguist."

"An odd choice of victims, sir," Supay said.

"Is it? They're all experts we'll need when we reach HD 209458, but we could survive without them if we had to."

The relative importance of the victims was evidenced by their mausoleums — or rather, by those of their neighbours, since nothing remained of their own except powder.

Large sepulchres on high terraces, most sporting some form of discreet decoration. Arawn knew he would not be so rewarded on his death. He was only a policeman. They'd give him something small and plain and on the lowest terrace. He felt a twinge of envy that he, and his occupation, were deemed so unimportant.

Arawn himself had only a vague understanding of the disciplines practiced by the victims. Climatology? Seismology? Neither existed in this artificial world. Linguist? Here, they all spoke the same language.

Arawn strolled away from the crime-scene. As he left the radiance cast by the techs' spotlights, a sudden darkness descended on him, and he felt as though his eyelids had been sewn shut. He blinked, raised his hands and saw them float spectrally before him, the sleeves of his jacket invisible against the black ground.

"Who is doing this?" he asked the dead. "And why?"

They did not answer. He had not expected them to.

Arawn's desktop flashed for attention. He closed the report he was working on with a sweep of the hand, and opened the alert. It was Flins.

"You need to see this," the police technician said.

Flins' face was replaced by a view of a residential nexus. It was dark, and so clearly abandoned. There were many such nexuses scattered throughout the cylinder.

No, wait. Arawn leaned in close. He could see something flickering among the dark buildings, something bright and yellow and dancing in the shadows. Was it someone with a light? No, it moved too erratically. And it was growing, spreading... puddling and pooling as it did so.

Fire!

"Supay! Arawn bellowed. "Get the cart!" To his desktop, the inspector ordered, "Get me a location on the nexus. Load the route into the cart."

On the road, as Supay piloted the cart at high speed, Arawn contacted Flins, who was also en route. "Who called it in?" he asked the technician. "Why have the fire-suppressants not kicked in?"

Flins shrugged. "The alarm was raised automatically. But nothing else worked."

There was no fire brigade aboard, no technicians whose job it was to fight fires. Automatic systems did it much more efficiently, and safely. When they worked. Or had not been sabotaged.

Arawn and Supay sped between black fields, beneath a rolling, night-black sky dotted with beacons of light. Arawn felt anger at this destruction of property. He should have felt the same at the deaths of those in the destroyed mausoleums. But he could not. They were tombs. They contained dead bodies. Important ones, true. Ones that would one day a century hence live again. But to him they were abstract. A residential nexus was something solid, tactile; it had physicality. The nexus aflame was likely similar to the one in which Arawn lived. It could almost be his house on fire.

He saw it ahead — a candle-flame smeared across a stretch of the horizon. It writhed sensuously, disturbingly. Arawn willed the cart faster, but the small electric vehicle was travelling at its maximum speed.

Flins had beaten them to the scene of the crime. The police technician waved at them from the top of a nearby hill. Arawn instructed Supay pull up. He clambered out once the vehicle had halted and, the constable on his trail, hurried up to where Flins stood. From their vantage point, the three of them stood and watched the empty residential nexus burn. For the first time in years, the nexus was haloed with light; a flickering, serpentine light which crackled and roared as it consumed abandoned homes

and gardens. A shift in the wind blew acrid smoke across the hilltop. Arawn's eyes streamed. He pulled in a breath through his nose, and coughed and hacked from the inhaled fumes.

"We'll be lucky to find any useful evidence when that goes out," Flins said in disgust.

"Such a bloody waste," Arawn replied angrily. "What can they could hope to achieve?"

He was running along a road. The road was dark. He saw only a suggestion of its shape against the ground ahead. The sky above was black. There were no islands of light visible anywhere. He ran at a steady pace with the practiced ease of an athlete. But he could not stop — there was something behind him, and he must stay ahead of it.

He ran on. He did not know his destination, but felt an urgent need to reach it. The sound of his feet hitting the road's surface was the only sound he heard. And with each step he took, his sense of urgency grew. Now he was no longer running from something, but towards something else.

He briefly wondered at his situation. He knew himself to be incapable of maintaining the pace at which he currently ran. Although not a lazy man, he had not performed any strenuous exercise in decades. A good stiff walk was his limit.

He knew his destination now. As if conjured by the thought, the end of the road pistoned out of the darkness towards him. It was an archway a shade lighter than the darkness to either side. He could see stars, loops and whorls of them stitched across the blackness. He slowed as he drew nearer. The road did not continue through the arch. It stopped — he could see a lip; but no surface beyond it.

He halted. He stood at the edge of a vast open space. Below him he saw a world, bright and round and inviting. It was blue, with white clouds dancing across it like storm-whipped ocean waves. As it turned, as the clouds slid across the face of the planet, he saw continents in greens and browns. Recognition was instant:

HD 209458.

He stood in the archway and gazed at the world. He would never look upon it himself, he would not live that long. But here it was, he could see it. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw only darkness. Not a single light burned in the cylinder. For all he knew, he could be the only person left aboard.

He turned back to the world below. The urgency was gone. He felt now only anticipation. He could see his goal, it had become real.

But he needed to keep running.

He saw a path now, threading its ways amongst the stars, shining with their light, leading the way to HD 209458. He could also see obstacles, places where the path appeared damaged or blocked. He must run before it became entirely impassable...

The nexus eventually burned out, and Arawn, Supay and Flins picked their way through the wreckage. This was not the first nexus lost to arson, but the third. And this time it was a commercial nexus, not a residential one. It had been deserted, but not unused — although it contained only a handful of businesses, and they had been closed for the night when the fire had started.

The smell was overpowering. Arawn, Supay and Flins entered the central square, and halted. Arawn turned slowly about, taking in the blackened and warped skeletons of buildings, the charred spills of rubble, the broad sweeps and washes of charcoal across

the paving slabs. He put a hand to his mouth and nose in the hope it would lessen the smell. It didn't.

"What's that?" demanded Flins.

The police technician started forwards, walking quickly towards one of the buildings lining the square. Arawn gestured at Supay, and the constable hurried to catch up with Flins. The inspector followed at a more leisurely pace.

By the time he'd ducked through the seared and streaked uprights which formed the building's doorway, Supay was already off to one side, bent over, the back of one hand to his mouth, gelatinous loops of spit hanging from his chin. He shuddered, pulled his hand from his face, and let out a stream of vomit. The sound of its splashing faded, and he let out a low pained moan.

Arawn ignored the constable and crossed to Flins. The technician squatted beside a pile of blackened debris, and was gazing intently at something. As he neared, Arawn saw what had prompted Supay's vomiting:

A corpse.

This was an actual dead body, not one of the carefully preserved cadavers found in the mausoleums in the necropolises. It lay face down, knees drawn up to one side, burnt and black, with limbs like iron rods and a head like a glistening black stone. Arawn detected a faint odour of cooked meat, and put his own hand to his mouth.

"The fire killed him?" he asked Flins.

"Not sure," the forensic technician replied. "The position of the body suggests not."

"What was he doing in here? It was the middle of the night."

Flins bent forward and pointed at a pile of dark objects spilled on the ground beside the corpse. It was a moment before Arawn identified them as credit tokens.

"He was stealing?" Arawn asked incredulously. Why would anyone do such a thing? Everyone had everything they needed – even if their wants were not always met. Greed interfered with the smooth running of the cylinder. It was almost unthinkable that someone would succumb to avarice.

So this, Arawn supposed, was a form of justice. The thief had been killed by his environment, by the cylinder itself.

No. These terrorists – they had murdered the thief. He was their first live victim.

"See if you can identify him," Arawn told Flins wearily. "For my report."

Councillor Anton Jabru demanded Inspector's Arawn's presence. Annoyed, Arawn put down the sandwich into which he'd been about to bite. His lunch was overdue and he was hungry. But when Jabru called, Arawn obeyed.

Supay drove the inspector across to the administrative nexus containing the councillor's offices. Arawn was ushered straight through into Jabru's presence. He despised the councillor – his interference, his need for involvement in everything he could use to further his own career. The man's unfitness for office could be seen in his great girth: such evidence of gluttony was symptomatic of Jabru's fevered consumption of authority.

Stomach rumbling, Arawn came to a halt before Jabru's desk. The councillor continued to read the notepad on his desk. He liked to play such games, to demonstrate his civil mastery over those who visited him. The inspector glanced to his left, where a water-feature formed part of the chamber's wall. It was a series of vertical water cascades, near-silent but for a friendly sibilance and the occasional jolly gurgle. Arawn always found its presence disturbing. It served no purpose whatsoever. Which might well

have been its objective. Yet more conspicuous authority.

“I hope you’re working hard on this, Dante,” Jabru said.

Arawn turned back to look at the councillor. “Of course, sir,” he said.

“I want results and I want them quick.”

“How urgent is this?” Arawn asked. “Do we know yet when we’ll arrive?”

Jabru shrugged heavily. “We’re on timetable, as far as I’m aware – so another century at least.”

Arawn had already known he’d not live to see the day the ship arrived in orbit about the exoplanet. In fact, none of the eight thousand colonists currently alive would see that day – not even young Constable Supay. Afterwards, perhaps – years later, when the colony was prospering. Then, Arawn might be resurrected. After all, what use was a policeman during the early stages of carving out a settlement on an alien world? That was when they needed seismologists, xenobotanists and climatologists.

“You don’t have any clues?” Jabru asked.

“No, nothing yet. They haven’t even told us what they want.”

Jabru steepled his fingers and leaned back in his protesting chair. “Not good enough, Dante. I want results. If you can’t do the job, I’ll have to accede to their demands. Whatever they are.”

“That would be dangerous.”

The councillor gestured negligently. “Have they seriously harmed anyone?”

“Besides the dead?” Arawn asked. “Surely they count?” The dead, after all, were the reason for this journey.

Another meaningless wave of the hand. “I suppose so. But I need you to get cracking on this. It can’t be that difficult. We’re not that large a group.”

“True.” Arawn shrugged. “But we don’t really have the tools we need for these sorts of cases... Who could have imagined terrorists aboard a generation starship?”

Inspector Arawn had lied to Councillor Jabru. He had a shrewd idea what the terrorists wanted. They were, he suspected, like himself: unimportant to the main colonisation effort. They wanted assurances they would be resurrected. He had dreamt it: a shining world at the end of a twisting path; a need to run, to keep on running.

At present there was no guarantee people like Arawn would be preserved in necropolises. All those mausoleums, all those dead people needed for the settlement of HD 209458 – the energy burden required to maintain the bodies in stasis within the tombs increased each year.

The darkness was the result.

Arawn himself was figuratively in the dark. He sat at his desk and stared at a report of the crimes committed by the terrorists over the past two weeks. Six mausoleums destroyed, three nexuses burnt. And the dead thief, of course. And not a single forensic clue to the identities of the perpetrators. Flins’ reports were comprehensive but inconclusive. Arawn had already run analyses on them, looking for differences, similarities, patterns...

This case, the most serious in the cylinder’s brief history, conflicted him. He could almost feel his moral compass spinning. The victims had lived long before he was born and, given that, outrage seemed inappropriate. What had they lost? The right to be revived at journey’s end. It was a privilege he might not enjoy himself. Especially not if, as he suspected, the increasing energy burden of the dead resulted in some form of triage.

Arms folded tightly across his chest, Arawn stared mulishly at the report. He felt

his life was turning increasingly purgatorial. It was not just this interstellar journey: he had been born en route, as had everyone else currently alive, so he'd not witnessed the departure from Earth. Nor would he be present for the arrival at HD 209458. This case too had him in limbo. It should not have been difficult to identify the perpetrators, but he had failed to do so. And he could no longer work up the enthusiasm to see justice served. The deaths of the scientists had him questioning his own loyalty to the mission.

Why should his contribution be ignored?

His nightmare of running continued to haunt him. The darkness outside oppressed him.

He needed to see Jabru again. More resources, he needed more resources. Surveillance tools to watch the necropolises. He called for Supay, but the constable did not appear. The police cart he drove had gone from its parking space. Annoyed, Arawn drove himself in another vehicle to the councillor's office. As he negotiated the entrance of the courtyard before Jabru's office, the inspector saw a police cart shoot through an exit across from him. He recognised the number on its rear.

Supay's cart.

Arawn set off in pursuit. They left the nexus and sped through dark fields. Arawn kept well back, using his cart's dashboard to track the constable. He called up dispatch, but there was nothing there to explain Supay's behaviour. The constable was on duty. His place was at the station, by the inspector's side. Not somewhere ahead, hidden in the darkness, invisible even using night-vision.

Supay had stopped beside a necropolis. Arawn drove up and parked beside the constable's cart. It was empty. He looked at low tiered hill on which the mausoleums darkly waited, but could see nothing. Something about that silent parliament of dead struck him with fear for the first time. They out-numbered him and the weight of their years lay heavy on the night air. He crossed to necropolis and stepped up onto the first terrace. His eyesight had adjusted, but the tombs remained vague shapes hovering just beyond recognition and meaning.

Where was Supay? What was he doing here?

As if prompted by the thought, an image of the constable's face came to mind. Arawn remembered Supay at the scene of that first bomb, stepping out of the darkness, his features smoothing to blankness as he entered the light. But Arawn had seen the earlier expression on his face.

Contempt.

Arawn stepped up onto the second level. How had the terrorists known who was interred where? Logs had shown only people with legitimate reasons had accessed the databases. Including the police.

The inspector climbed onto the third terrace. Supay had not been at the cart after Arawn's meeting with Jabru. It had been several minutes before he appeared.

Fourth level. There was that remark Supay had made about the importance of climatologists.

Fifth. The constable's residential nexus had been closed down the month before, and he'd been forced to move.

Sixth. Supay's horror at the man who had burned to death.

Seventh...

Arawn spotted Supay immediately. The constable was bending over some device attached to a mausoleum no more than ten feet away. In the red and orange light of the device's control panel, his features seemed hidden behind a wall of flame.

"Supay!"

Startled, the constable straightened and peered blindly at Arawn. He could not

see, his night-vision had been ruined.

The lights on the control panel abruptly died. Supay turned and ran. He hit another tomb a glancing blow, and then leapt down to the level below. Arawn hurried after him. He could see well enough to thread a path among the mausoleums, and was reminded of his dream yet again. He wove his way among the dead.

Supay was waiting by his cart for the inspector. Arawn approached, too winded to speak, and held up a hand to show he had questions to ask.

The constable pulled a notepad from his pocket, held it up before him, and pressed firmly on its display.

For one very brief second, a sense of consequence came over Arawn. He felt the importance of the moment as a physical sensation.

Behind him, the entire upper two terraces of the necropolis disappeared in a vast detonation.

Sound battered the two of them. A great flash threw details into knife-edged relief, etched sharp black shadows on the ground. A wind belled about Arawn, ruffling his hair and whipping his coat about his body. Supay spoke, but Arawn caught only parts of his words. The rest were stolen by the explosion, by its after-effects.

He turned to stare up at the necropolis. A low cloud, glowing hellishly like a banked fire, was slowly rising from its shattered peak.

“You want to be there, don’t you?” shouted Arawn. His ears were still ringing.

Supay turned to him and frowned.

“You want to be there when we reach HD 209458,” repeated Arawn. He wanted this purgatory over himself. He wanted closure. A new world was closure. “That’s why you killed those dead scientists.” He threw out an arm to gather in the necropolis, to present it in illustration of his meaning.

The constable shook his head. He put both hands flat on the roof of his cart. “I don’t care about the new world,” he said loudly. Too loudly. Their hearing had recovered.

“Then why?”

“How can I care about the exoplanet?” Supay continued in anger. “It’s not real to me. This is real to me.” He swung his arms wide. “We want this lit again. We want them to banish the darkness. It’s killing us!”

“It’s saving us, you fool,” Arawn said.

“No.” Supay shook his head vigorously. Arawn had never seen so much emotion from the constable. It was pouring off him in waves. “We don’t need all these dead people. The energy burden of keeping them safe for revival is killing us. We can learn the skills we need. We still have the texts, we still have the expert systems.”

“Don’t they have a right to be there at the end of the journey?” asked Arawn. “Without them, there’d be no trip. We’re here because of them.”

“Yes, yes. But now they’re ghouls, sucking the life from us.” Supay lifted a hand and slapped it down on the cart’s roof. The fleshy thud it made seemed an affront to the explosion still ringing in memory.

“I want you to tell them,” Supay said, “to tell Jabru and all the others. I want you to say to them that we’re no longer willing to carry the dead any more. We’ll no longer sacrifice our own lives for the dead. The cylinder must return to full brightness. And the dead must be allowed to die. For good.”

At that exact moment, Arawn remembered his conversation with Jabru. “I’ll have to accede to their demands,” the councillor had said. For such a man, for one driven by a lust for power... Supay’s demands gave him exactly what he wanted.

Of course he would submit.

Perhaps Jabru had arranged it all himself. Supay had said “we”, after all; he had

visited the councillor.

Arawn turned his back on Supay and stared out at the dark cylinder. He saw the land, pale and ethereal in the permanent night, curve up and away from him. There was a small dome of light, a residential nexus. In its narrow streets and small comfortable houses, the other travellers on this journey lived through another day. Lives that were all movement, but without a destination. Or a beginning. In Arawn's dream, he had been running. He had not started running. He had already been running when he entered the dream. He had also woken before he reached the world he'd seen below. Perhaps one day he might have trod the soil of that new world — died, been interred in some mausoleum, and then revived a century or more later. No longer. Not if Supay had his way — and Arawn knew, with a heart which now felt like an unwelcome burden, that Jabru would be suspiciously quick to acquiesce.

All purgatories, Arawn decided, must feel eternal, but they were temporary. These terrorists — Supay and Jabru — were not freedom fighters. Purgatory was not a prison; it was a process. Those in limbo needed to learn respect for their destination. Heaven had to be earned. That made the suffering worthwhile.

Make a heaven of the cylinder, of this hollowed-out asteroid hurtling through space, and the journey — the process — would lose its purpose. They'd not stop at HD 209458. They'd carry on, through the endless starry night, living in comfort, each generation more lost than the one before...

Lost.

Forever.

And ever.

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